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# Hills, Old People, and Sheep

Reflections of Holmfirth as the *Summer Wine* town

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## Abstract

Holmfirth, West Yorkshire, UK is globally renowned as the setting for the world's longest running sitcom *Last of the Summer Wine* (UK, BBC, 1973-2010). This article explores how the TV series has become embedded in the practical existence of the town and draws on empirical research with residents of Holmfirth which shows how people situate themselves in relation to their factual and fictionalized cultural heritage. In this paper we consider the interrelationship between media and memories and the role that nostalgia plays for the production, commodification, distribution and exchange of narratives.

Holmfirth is a rural market town in the Holme Valley, West Yorkshire, UK; the center point between three major cities in the north of England, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield. Historically built on farming, agriculture and the textile industries, the town exists in the 21st century in much the same way as many former mill towns across the Pennines do, a composite of 19th century factories and newer developments left somewhat scarred by the millennial recession. Holmfirth differs from many similar small towns by having two significant relationships to global media. The first is that it is the birthplace of *Bamforth & Co. Ltd*, a silent film production house which set up business in 1870 and became known for its moving pictures and “saucy” seaside postcards. Over the late 19th century Bamforth's success surpassed that of the US film industry and the town was colloquially dubbed the “Hollywood of the North”. Bamforth relocated the production of moving pictures to London in 1915 and an archive of the original Bamforth postcards is placed in the Holmfirth *Picturedrome*, a local music venue which itself is a former cinema. When the company was eventually sold off in the 1980s the factory stood derelict in the center of town for over thirty years. In 2016 it was purchased by the owners of the *Picturedrome* and is currently being re-developed.

The other prominent link to global media, which is explored further in this article, is that Holmfirth is the main filming location for *Last of the Summer Wine* (UK, BBC, 1973-2010), a series which lays

claim to being the longest running sitcom in the world. Over the course of its production, *Last of the Summer Wine* consistently garnered high viewing figures for the BBC and is particularly profitable overseas (Vine, 2011). In 2016, six years after the final episode was originally broadcasted, it remains a regular feature on British television albeit relegated far from its peak prime time family slot on BBC1. Today, its syndication on free-to-air digital channels such as *Yesterday* and BBC Gold ensures that it shows a near permanent presence throughout the day.

## Imagining Holmfirth

The extraordinary length of *Last of the Summer Wine's* production, its presence on television for over forty years, and its existence as television “wallpaper” (Bourdon, 2003, p. 6) have all played a part to ensure that Holmfirth's synonymy with the series is firmly established. As we have argued elsewhere, Holmfirth as place and *Last of the Summer Wine* as text both help to define each other as a composite memory of “timeless rural Yorkshire” (Hibberd & Tew-Thompson, in press). These bucolic images draw on a known trope in which series such as *Last of the Summer Wine* and similar shows such as *Heartbeat* (UK, YTV, 1992-date), *Where the Heart Is* (UK, ITV, 1997-2006) and *All Creatures Great and Small* (UK, BBC, 1978-1990) offer versions of “ordinariness” and “simple pleasures” which are inherently nostalgic

and help to establish a quintessential rural northern identity as a conceptually shared memory (Davidson, 2005; Armitage, 2009; Russell, 2004). *Last of the Summer Wine* specifically has nostalgia at its core. This is indicated both through its title which implies the pleasures resulting from imbibing the final drop of a season's bounty; and through its content which follows the antics of three elderly friends, Compo, Foggy and Clegg, as they wander around their locale, reminiscing about former times, commenting on and often bemoaning the changing times, and reveling in their twilight years. The visual imagery of the series lends itself to the formation of shared episodic memories: "three elderly men sliding down a hill on a tea tray" comes immediately to mind. In addition, the visual tropes of the "rural north" draw on landscape photography which promises televisual pleasure as a series of spectacular attractions (Wheatley, 2016), and on a documentary/realist tradition which works to encapsulate, enable and solidify present-day practices of remembering (Keightley & Schlesinger, 2014, p. 746). The dramatization of the "ordinary" lives of the fictional characters on screen, particularly over such a prolonged time, has helped the town to exist as both an imagined and known entity, creating a virtual visual memory of the region regardless of whether Holmfirth (or West Yorkshire) has been visited or even whether the television series has been encountered. The title of our paper reflects this and derives from an offhand remark made by one of our students who had neither visited Holmfirth nor watched *Last of the Summer Wine*, but who concluded from her knowledge of the series as wallpaper that the area must be constituted of "hills, old people and sheep".

We now turn to considering how *Last of the Summer Wine* as a TV text manages to move beyond the diegetic world of the series, into the spaces of the town in which it was filmed, and become embedded into the lived experiences of Holmfirth residents. In this paper, we are particularly concerned with examining the role of nostalgia and recollections. We begin by outlining the scholarly basis for this study and then move on to describe some of the ways in which the series is woven into the fabric of the town. Finally, we examine the role of nostalgia as a structuring trope to explain how *Last of the Summer Wine* is embedded in the ways that people talk about and experience the area.

## Television and Nostalgia

Television and nostalgia are inextricable. Amy Holdsworth (2011) argues that memories of past television and past television viewing experiences, which are often tied to the space of the home and exist within familial structures, can be seen as indicative of a desire to anchor ourselves in the world, a practice which draws implicitly on nostalgic recourse to the known, comfortable, and familiar. Holdsworth is predominantly concerned with examining how memory and nostalgia are represented, constructed and produced by television in order to produce "televisual memory": the representation of, and nature of, memory on television. Other scholarly work on nostalgia television (Kompere, 2005; O'Sullivan, 1998; Spigel, 2001) is similarly characterized by a concern with the television "text" and the ways in which television constructs and cements moments in history in a way which necessitates an affective response (Doane, 1990; Kuhn, 1995). We seek here to broaden out the debate to include embodied and affective responses not just to the text itself but its afterlife and effect on the constitution of place in Holmfirth. In doing so we draw on what Shaun Moores (2012) has referred to as a non-media-centric approach to media studies, which moves beyond considering the representational "text" (Pink, 2012; Moores, 2012; Krajina, Moores & Morley, 2014).

## Methodology

The empirical research that underpins this article is still underway and comprises interviews, focus groups and longer-term auto-ethnographic work. The interviews that we draw on here predominantly took place between October 2014 and 2015, and consist of twelve face-to-face interviews conducted in residential homes and cafes in Holmfirth. Three of the interviewees referred to in this article invited friends and/or partners to take part in the discussion. The voices that we draw on make up a selection of people that responded to leaflet and flyer drops around the town. As we sought to investigate not the television series *per se*, but rather the way in which television is encountered, embedded and referred to on a banal, daily basis, these advertisements asked people to discuss their experiences of living in Holmfirth. While we anticipated that this might result in data which do not include any referents to the series, in fact this

was not the case. In all of the interviews to date, references to the television series have surfaced either by name or by associative comments (e.g. comments about “the tour bus”, businesses named after fictional characters, and places renown with particular incidents). Our immediate problem was in trying to examine how *Last of the Summer Wine* might inform understandings and experiences of Holmfirth without directly pointing to the TV series and so tipping the conversation towards it. Decisions over who to interview were based entirely on the willingness of people to participate, judgments about “typicality” or “representativeness” (see Cook & Crang, 1995; Geiger, 1990; McCracken, 1988) were not considered. Coincidentally, all of the respondents quoted here have lived in Holmfirth for more than ten years, and while all of them identified the area as “home”, not all of them considered themselves to be “local”. Our interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and although names have been changed in accordance with our institutional ethical guidelines, some of our participants were keen to retain their own names and be quoted as such. We consider that the lack of acknowledgement of ownership over personal voice is an issue that needs further consideration if we are to truly engage with research practices which aim to break down barriers between the academy and the public.

A final methodological note acknowledges that one of the authors of this article lives in Holmfirth. Consequently, she draws on her personal observations from the experience of being resident in the town (direct lived experiences which prompted this research in the first instance), and acknowledges that responses to the interviews may have been influenced by respondents’ sense that they were talking with someone “local” who knew the town first hand. Ien Ang (1996) notes the importance of considering ethnography not as a quest for realist knowledge but rather as a “form of storytelling” in which descriptions of everyday life retain their veracity while the “deeply partial position” of researchers as storytellers is nonetheless acknowledged. This refocus sees the researcher as

*“a producer of descriptions, which, as soon as they enter the uneven, power-laden field of social discourse, play their political roles as particular ways of seeing and organizing an ever-illusive reality.”*

(Ang, 1996, p. 75-76)

The broader considerations that arise from this methodology are the focus of study elsewhere (Tew-Thompson & Hibberd, in progress).

### “The Summer Wine Town”

We now turn to the interrelationship between nostalgic memories and *Last of the Summer Wine* by considering Holmfirth as a location.

After 37 years of filming, *Last of the Summer Wine* is embedded into the fabric of the town in such a way that simply to be in Holmfirth represents a blurring of the line between fictional setting and actual location. As broadcaster Stuart Maconie (2012, p. 145-147) notes in his book *A People’s History of Modern Britain*, simply to be in Holmfirth is akin to walking into a television history which has been unwittingly absorbed and sometimes actively resisted. For example, *Sid’s Café* in the center of the town is a small café named after one of the characters in the series. Formerly a back room of an ironmonger, it was mocked up as a café by the BBC and used as an exterior location shoot. In 1979 the owners realized the potential for the tourist market by realizing it as an actual café – the real “Sid’s” is the fictional “Ivy’s” café in the series (in which Sid is Ivy’s husband). A life-sized statue of Compo, the most enduring character in the series, stands outside where it is a permanent fixture for tourist photos. The “real” Compo – actor Bill Owens – is buried in a church less than a mile away from the statue. While built environments such as Sid’s and “Compo’s Chip Shop” are named after key characters, others imply a knowledge of the series through indirect allusions. “The Wrinkled Stocking” tea room above “Nora Batty’s steps” is named after the fetishized legwear that is a defining feature of Sid’s love interest. Nora Batty’s steps are named so because they are the real steps used as an external location shoot for this character, and are in turn next to the *Summer Wine* experience. This small commemorative museum and gift shop beckons visitors with a signpost phrased in old Yorkshire dialect: “Ee, tha’d best come and see Last of t’Summer exhibition, tha knows”. Inside, nostalgia is similarly evident in the commodification of *Last of the Summer Wine*. Souvenirs and merchandise draw on times past and mundane domestic activities, with characters displayed on tea towels, aprons, jars of boiled sweets, packets of biscuits, jigsaws and mugs. Picture postcards featuring stills from the series have crinkled edges and companion books (for

example Bell, 2012; Kitson, 1990) promise happy memories and authentic inside tales. Alongside the merchandise box sets of the DVDs, themselves now reminiscent of a somewhat outmoded 20th century medium, are for sale. Outside the museum the “Summer Wine Magic” tour bus is a regular daily feature of the local landscape. This ostensibly directs the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) toward the TV series through its journey through the older southern side of the valley, past cobbled ginnels, steep winding steps and weavers’ cottages. At the same time, it punctures the representation of Holmfirth as an area of bucolic pleasures by situating the pleasurable nostalgia of the fictional TV series alongside other disturbing, disruptive reminiscences, including several fatal floods and the infamous Moors murders of the 1960s (see Hibberd & Tew-Thompson, in press).

Many of these “experiences” of Holmfirth were clearly established to attract tourism in the first instance, and remain *in situ* to ensure its persistence in the valley. (For example, a public bus timetable published in 2016 in order to detail a new route advertises that it goes “through *Last of the Summer Wine* country”, suggesting that the series is still present in the public imagination as well as a reason for visiting the town in the first instance.) Alongside this official discourse there is also evidence of more personal engagement and ownership of the series. Signed photographs of stars of the show, living and deceased, feature on the walls of most local businesses where they are displayed as though they are family snapshots, and many of our respondents spoke warmly of the “close encounters” (Bourdon, 2003, p. 6) that they had with *Summer Wine* over the course of its production. These recollections of quotidian experiences with non-textual television are indicative of personal and collective memories established and shared through popular culture (Tinkler, 2013, p. xvii), which are in this case embedded into daily lives through the presence of multiple para-texts (Gray, 2010). Many of these close encounters are recalled as banal or trite by our respondents, dismissals which perhaps reflect the “lowly” status of much popular television. If TV’s immediacy as a medium relegates it to an overlooked position, *Last of the Summer Wine* as the very epitome of TV that “has been around for years, and is doing now what it has always done” (Mills, 2010, p. 6) is further denigrated. As Brett Mills identifies, the over-familiarity and omnipresence of popular TV texts often means that they are rendered invisible by academic work

with its tendency to “downplay the significance of the old, the ongoing, the repetitive, the always-there” (Mills, 2010, p. 7). In addition, the older members of its cast and target demographic remain on the periphery of media and cultural studies (Tulloch, 1989), and television studies marginalizes critical engagement with this type of ordinary, everyday TV (Bonner, 2003) which is critically constructed as “easy [...] simplistic, and watched by lazy audiences” (Gorton, 2006, p. 72). This critical neglect is indicative of the way in which cultural studies perpetuates and reinforces hierarchies at the same time that it claims to critique them (Murdock, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997). However, as Penny Tinkler (2013) has noted, these nostalgic encounters have a radical potential, offering an articulation and interpretation of personal memories which differs from public histories “from above” by governments and officiated discourses. We now turn to explore the nature of these memories which indicate how *Last of the Summer Wine* as a TV text produced and distributed through a public service discourse is made personal and individual.

## Memories

The interview extracts that we turn to now make up part of our ongoing empirical research into life in the Holme Valley, and we draw on them to show how the adoption of the *Summer Wine* sobriquet forms part of a broader system of signification and representation through which experiences are negotiated, interpreted and understood (Edensor, 1998). The voices of residents in Holmfirth give some indication of how nostalgic memories are used to mobilize groups and form identities. By linking individual memories to collective forms of remembrance facilitated through *Last of the Summer Wine* we are able to offer a tacit appreciation of a shared cultural history which brings together people and places. We draw on our participants’ responses here to illustrate how the reality of living in Holmfirth is a composite of community and cultural memories which catalyze each other to become visible, pertinent, and real. As noted above, most often *Last of the Summer Wine* is mentioned in a banal, fully integrated manner, wholly disassociated from the TV series and used instead as a naturalized history and way of referring to people, places, memories and events. For example, Margaret notes;



Margaret: “[...] but my son lives up the other way, past Compo’s, you know the first left before the Greenfield? He’s been up there [...]”

This offhand comment indicates the embedded nature of the show’s presence in the town: its presence, like a road named after a deceased person or practice, is used simply as an indicator of place with no association to its original referent. It is also indicative of the intimacy between interviewer and respondent highlighted in the methodology. Here, there is a clear sense in which the respondent is able to rely on the interviewer’s first-hand knowledge of the town to “correctly” interpret where *Compo’s* is and what it refers to. (Someone unfamiliar with the area could rightly conclude that there are at least three places in Holmfirth which could be – and frequently are – referred to as *Compo’s*.)

Regardless of whether or not they had ever seen the series, all of our respondents identified that *Last of the Summer Wine* would be a defining feature of how they described Holmfirth to someone not familiar with the area;

Joan: “[...] and everybody knows Holmfirth because you had the ‘Last of the Summer Wine town’ especially if you’re talking to the older generation, they know where it is straightaway.”

Residents used the series as a marker of belonging in which they positioned themselves as casually disinterested in the series whilst suggesting tourists would be drawn in by it. The vast majority of our respondents had a *Last of the Summer Wine* story which they would use as a way of disavowing connection to Holmfirth as a setting and instead establishing it as a real place in which everyday things happen. This sense of an authentic Holmfirth was reinforced by statements which drew attention to the artifice of the TV text as a construction;

Vivian: “I think [we used to watch it], yeah, because we’d spot where it was. And you can work out like they used to get on the bus in one place and get off somewhere else. It wasn’t quite right but you only know that if you know the area.”

The ways in which Holmfirth residents situate themselves as having “authentic” knowledge of the area is reminiscent of Tom Mordue’s (2001) analysis of Goathland, North Yorkshire

as the setting for YTV’s rural drama *Heartbeat*. Mordue’s research notes that residents enact and encode performances of belonging in their home territory, as compared to tourists consuming the same space. By engaging in discursive strategies that attempt to regulate local space, Mordue argues that residents determine the type of performances that should take place within it. Here, we see that residents position their accounts of a “real” Holmfirth with reference to the TV series at the same time that they distance themselves from it. A similar distancing tendency can be seen in the way that residents refer to the series with a degree of humility. In his cultural geography of New Jersey as “Sopranoland”, Lance Strate (2002, p. 180) identifies a sense of personal pride in seeing his home turf feature as a backdrop to the flagship HBO series *The Sopranos* (USA, HBO, 1999–2007), while also noting a sense of gratification from “viewing the finished product, knowing that millions of other people are watching it along with you.” That this sense of pride is not evident in our respondents perhaps reflects the lowly positioning of *Last of the Summer Wine* as ordinary television against the reified status of HBO’s quality output. Rather, the quotidian nature of *Last of the Summer Wine* suggests embarrassment in either the text and/or the nostalgia associated with it;

Rob: “Anyway, but I can’t watch it. [Laughs] I just, you know it’s interesting to see but I can’t watch it. I don’t find it very interesting.”

The sense of global community that Strate (2002) identifies is however evident, and can be seen both in accounts of people watching it (in the early days) to see their home on TV, as well as an awareness that this made them globally visible;

Joan: “We’ve a family friend who lives in Canada, moved [from here] over thirty years ago. And he would be about 80 now but he loves it. And so do his friends, still watch it.”

The quote above gives a sense in which Joan imagines a mediated community brought together by a shared understanding of *Last of the Summer Wine* as a text which is made all the more pleasurable because of its resonance to place and the past. The wistful allure of *Last of the Summer Wine* is similarly evident in the ways in which it is used by residents as a temporal grammar (Lull, 1980; Morley, 2006) which connects media and nostalgic memories. Molly recalls;

Molly: "I know exactly when the first one was shown on television because it was the day that I came out of hospital with our youngest son. He'd just been born. So I can always date it."

Many of our respondents also invested in a cultural framing of the countryside that evokes the "rural idyll" which is inherently nostalgic (Newby, 1979). Some of the recollections of daily life appropriate the rural mythologies of *Last of the Summer Wine* in an understanding of how life used to be;

Margaret: "[It] was great when the children were growing up because, well, it was an old-fashioned childhood because we had the woods and we had the stream and they could go walking the dogs and messing about and playing in the woods and it felt safe... That sort of childhood was idyllic really for them."

One of our respondents set her experience of living in a rural area in direct opposition to the bucolic idylls of televisual representations;

Barbara: "I think I usually say we live on the moors. To me moorland means walking up the road and then walking into a beautiful area of incredible countryside. But it's a specific sort of countryside that is very different. If you say you live in the countryside in Yorkshire, people tend to think, 'Oh Herriott, the countryside.' The *Last of the Summer Wine* didn't particularly emphasize the wildness with the moors, I mean not that we watched it after the first couple of series. If you start moving over towards [here], it's really wild countryside and not particularly attractive."

For Barbara, the idyllic nature of televisual representations is persistent and romanticized yet exists alongside another persistent and contradictory visual trope, "it's grim up north". In referring to *Last of the Summer Wine* and alluding to James Herriott's *All Creatures Great and Small* (it is not clear from this comment whether she has the TV series or books at the forefront of her imagination), Barbara draws on a romantic, nostalgic visual framing which she acknowledges is at odds with her daily lived experience.

Many of our respondents' accounts of daily life, habits, and routines use *Last of the Summer Wine* as a marker of Holmfirth "then and now". While the longevity of the show makes it difficult to attribute societal change either directly or

solely to the series, most respondents refer to a television grammar whereby Holmfirth as a town is punctuated as existing before and after *Last of the Summer Wine*. For example, one couple perceived a structural change in the organization of commerce in the town which they attributed to the series;

Barbara: "Yes, we were here when they started filming. It's made a big difference to - it did make a big difference to Holmfirth and when we first came, the shops in Holmfirth would close on Saturday afternoon, and everything closed on Saturday afternoon."

David: "And then following the *Last of the Summer Wine* and people starting to come, it meant that the shops were open in the afternoon and that people wanted somewhere to go, so it made an enormous difference."

Barbara: "It certainly was a big growth from a small, not really a, almost didn't feel like a town, did it? [David nods agreement]. We liked it. It was good because it meant that the town became alive. And yes, and the shops became more interesting. Before then, things were strange."

What is particularly interesting in this account is the sense of "strangeness" attributed to Holmfirth in the late 1960s which indicates how the past as reproduced through memories exists in the context of current social organization (Halbwachs, 1992). Earlier in this interview both Barbara and David had attributed their motivation for moving to Holmfirth to its isolation and rurality, but in recalling the way that filming and consequently tourism became part of the town the earlier sense of isolation is remembered as alien.

## Concluding remarks

Although the series' longevity makes it difficult to determine a precise chronology of dates which can be used as yardstick for measuring change in the town, *Summer Wine*'s presence has indubitably impacted on local residents' experience of living there and is key to the establishing of Holmfirth as a tourist destination. Holmfirth's economic geography begins to change with the shifting cultural experience of the place, setting in place an oscillation that continues to this day even as the TV text shrinks from cultural memory and lives on in the repeats and re-runs of its syndication afterlife. Somewhere along the line there has been a subtle but important change in emphasis in

which the knowledge that “*Last of the Summer Wine* was filmed in Holmfirth” has become an account of “Holmfirth, location of *Last of the Summer Wine*”. This discrete but discernible shift is indicative of the way in which media memories, often formed without recourse to an actual text, are used as a prop for understanding place in which the factual and fictional are so closely aligned as to be barely distinguishable. A more recent metamorphosis in terminology further illustrates the way that the rich nostalgia of the TV series has become thoroughly embedded. After a period of being dubbed “Holmfirth, *Last of the Summer Wine* town” through personal recollections and officiated promotional discourses, the current nomenclature for Holmfirth is simply as “the *Summer Wine* town”. This sobriquet which conflates real and imagined place signifiers so as to make them inseparable (Mordue, 2001) is utilized as a way of referring to the area and events happening in and around it. “Summer Wine Trail runs” and the ‘Summer Shine car wash’ bear no relationship to the program, reach groups of people that were not the target audience of the series and are unlikely to have encountered it as a television series at all. This is partly a deliberate strategy by destination marketers to capture

tourists’ attention through known tropes (see Morgan & Pritchard, 1998) but also indicate how the *Summer Wine* sobriquet has been stabilized with meaning which is invoked through a shared conceptual memory. If *Last of the Summer Wine* is the central point in a tourist understanding of Holmfirth, the Summer Wine aura extends to the region as a whole.

Our interviews give an indication of the roles that nostalgia plays in the production, commodification, distribution, and exchange of narratives. *Last of the Summer Wine* manipulates cultural memory by spatially informing Holmfirth through signifiers of the factual and fictional past and offering re-memories of television as a text, institution and practice. Although the series broadcasted its final episode in 2010, its presence has been inscribed, embedded, and appropriated into the town and its people. In the voices of our respondents we detect both a pride in visibility and a sense that the remnants of *Last of the Summer Wine* are something of an embarrassment. These personal responses to texts and their afterlives remind us that *Last of the Summer Wine* is not just a cultural artifact but forms part of a wider cultural, industrial and personal interpretation of place.



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